DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 284 CS 210 734

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TITLE Making Writing Groups Work: Modifying Elbow's Teacherless Writing Group for the Classroom, 1977-1987.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; Expository Writing; *Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Peer Evaluation; *Reader Response; Revision (Written Composition); Secondary Education; Self Directed Groups; *Skill Development; Small Group Instruction; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Team Training; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Elbow (Peter)

ABSTRACT

Peter Elbow's concepts of "pointing," "summarizing," "telling," and "showing" can form an effective method for training students to give reader-based feedback to peer writing. In pointing, students jot down all the words and phrases they can remember from an oral reading of a draft. These lists stimulate summarizing, which involves writing down the main idea, feeling, or "center of gravity" of a piece. In telling, students write what occurred within them as they heard the piece read. This is followed by showing, an exercise in which students describe their reading responses in metaphorical terms (e.g. as hearing voices or as visualizing a vegetable), bringing partially conscious responses to the surface. In the ensuing group discussion students read their pointing lists, summaries, and other responses aloud. Authors mark pointing words in their drafts, note sections in the draft that made no impression on the listeners, and are given the listeners' written notes. Additional guidelines limit the duration of reading aloud, the reactions of writers to their listeners' responses ("don't argue, say 'thank you'"), and the amount of revision completed before group evaluation occurs. Student attitudes to such writing groups typically change from initial apprehension to feeling that the groups are very useful. (JG)

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Making Writing Groups Work:

Modifying Elbow's Teacherless Writing Group for the Classroom, 1977-1987

About ten years ago, after participating for a year in a writing group, I decided I wanted to use similar groups in my writing classes. Since my own group was based on the model set out in Chapter 4 of Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers (Oxford, 1973), it was natural that I should try to adapt that model to the classroom.

In what for me has always been one of the key passages in Chapter 4, Elbow says: "To improve your writing you don't need advice about what changes to make; you don't need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people's minds while they read your words." In short, you need to know what your words do--or fail to do--to people. Elbow goes on to describe four ways in which you can give "a movie of your mind": pointing, summarizing, telling, and showing. Over time, I've discovered that students need to be taught—even trained—to give this kind of reader-based feedback.

Before my students meet in writing groups for the first time, I read to them a rough draft of a student essay. I ask everyone to listen carefully. After I've read the draft once, I have the students jot down as quickly as possible all the words and phrases they can remember (Elbow calls this pointing). Then I ask them to write down what they perceive to be the main idea, the main feeling, the center of gravity of the piece. ("Center of gravity" is Elbow's phrase; I define it for my students as that toward which everything in a piece of writing is pulling.) I have them do both tasks quickly, without thinking much about what they are doing.

The next step is to read the essay aloud again. As before, I tell my

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students that all they need to do is listen carefully. This time I ask them to "tell" (Elbow's word) what happened in them as they heard the piece read again. "It's usually easiest to tell it in the form of a story," Elbow advises: "first this happened, then this happened, then this happened, and so on." I may prompt them: "Maybe the first thought that crossed your mind was 'Oh, no, I'm going to have to listen to this again,' and then maybe the word 'expedite' caught your attention, and then...."

When they've finished their "telling" response, I have them do one of the metaphorical exercises that Elbow calls showing. "Talk about the writing as though you were describing voices," he says. Or weather. Or a musical instrument. Or a vegetable. On the surface, this sounds like a ridiculous suggestion, and yet I've discovered that this exercise in "showing" can yield feedback that is very useful to the writer. Just doing the exercise bends students' minds a little, helps them see that it is possible to respond to writing in a new way. Besides, the exercise is fun--although the first time I tell my students to "Think of the piece of writing as a vegetable," most of them look at me in disbelief. I coax them: "Come on, you can't not think of a vegetable when I say 'Think of a vegetable.' Now write down the one that popped into your head." Once they have done that, I get them to write down the characteristics of that vegetable--its color, texture, taste, smell, and so on. Do they like this particular vegetable? "Now make the connection explicit: how is the piece of writing you've just listened to like the vegetable you've chosen?" Often they are amazed at the response they've been able to come up with; as Elbow says, "showing" enables people to bring to the surface responses that they are not totally conscious of.

What do I do next? Two things. First, I have my students read their feedback aloud to the person sitting next to them, for I want them to discover that there is no "right" pointing list or "right" summary or even "right" vegetable; their list is just their list. (It's a discovery that seems to

fill them with relief.) Second, after they've read their responses to a partner, I call for several volunteers to read their "pointing" lists aloud to the entire class. Usually I write the words from each volunteer's list on the board, putting check marks beside words and phrases that recur. "Now think how such feedback might help the writer to revise the piece of writing you've just listened to." I try to get everyone to see that it's helpful for the writer to know what words got through to listeners; the writer will probably want to keep them and maybe even expand the sections in which they appear. I also want them to see that it's equally helpful for the writer to know that there are sections from which listeners take no words away. The writing in such a section is not making much of an impression; it's up to the writer to find out why. In a subsequent class I sometimes show my students a page of my own prose on which I have drawn a line under a word or a phrase every time a listener mentioned it and then show them the page as I revised it after getting that feedback.

I also ask for volunteers to read aloud their summaries. Sometimes there's a lot of agreement about what various listeners heard the writer saying; sometimes there's not. Again I ask my students to think about how feedback like this might help when they sit down to revise. It soon becomes clear that such feedback lets writers know whether or not they're getting their points across. If five people come up with five different statements, then obviously they're not. In some cases there is a further benefit: writers, especially at the rough-draft stage, don't always know exactly what they are saying or exactly where they are going, and such feedback helps them discover what they actually want to say.

Elbow says, "Pointing and summarizing are not only the simplest ways to communicate your perception, but they are the most fool-proof and the most useful. Always start with pointing and summarizing." My experience with using groups in the classroom has led me to the same conclusion. Although

"showing" is fun and sometimes revealing, I do not usually have my students do much of it--at least not in the early part of the semester. Nor do I have them do much "telling" early in the semester. About a third of the way through, however, I encourage students to begin "telling"--and sometimes "showing"--their responses.

After students practice giving movies of their minds in these ways I hand out a schedule for their first group meeting and a set of directions they are to follow. [Handout] "Each writer," I say, "will get a little over twelve minutes. He or she will read four minutes of writing, then stop for a minute. During that minute, his or her listeners will write down on a scrap of paper all the words and phrases that stuck, that got through to them (in this case, more is better). Then the writer will read again what he or she has just read, neither more nor less. This will be followed by another minute of silence, during which the listeners will write down a summary of what they heard the writer say--the main points, main feelings, centers of gravity. Then they will write down something they wanted more of, some expectation--but only if something comes readily to mind. / [This is my own addition to Elbow's kind of feedback.] If, after everyone has read, there's still time left, the listeners will read aloud their various responses to the writers." I go beyond Elbow by having listeners write down their reactions for the writer instead of just giving them orally because I've found that it's useful for the writer to have something in hand--to have a departure point-- when he or she sits down to begin revising.

I give them still further directions. "Writers: give no introductions, apologies, explanations; ask no questions of your listeners. Don't argue with their responses. Say 'Thank you.'" And "Listeners: give no advice on what the writer should do. Don't give evaluations. Say 'You're welcome.'" I emphasize that the draft the student brings to read should be a draft: "please don't spend a lot of time polishing it." I tell them: it's human nature to

want to put your best foot forward, especially at first when you're sharing something you've written with a group of strangers: you don't want them to think you're stupid or something, right? But I ask them to resist the impulse. Why? Because if you've polished a piece, you will be less likely to use or even to listen to what your peers have to say about it, since you will have already made a commitment to what is.

Lots of directions. But, over the years, I've found that they're all necessary because the process is so different from what students are used to that they need to have—and to follow—very strict guidelines in order to make the groups work well. There needs to be a lot of certainty—who reads, how long the person reads, exactly how to respond. The process must also be fair: everybody must read and each writer must get exactly the same amount of time. I even specify the order in which the students read, telling them to sit in the same seat each time, next to the same people.

How do students respond to all of this? After their first day in a writing group, I ask them to freewrite a quick response. Here is what one student wrote:

> When I first read my [paper] I wished that it was over already. The second one (reading) was better. Hearing the other installments read was entertaining and fun. I realized that everyone or most everyone was in the same boat as I was. It felt good to get the writing done and to have the other's reactions to it. Most of the "pointing" and summaries were positive. I thought I needed more criticism than that. I know I still have a lot of work ahead of me. The comments were helpful. Having had to have the installment ready was helpful in that it got me going. As I kept going, more ideas came to my head. Some of the things that I thought were not too great got some good responses. Others that I thought were great were confusing to the audience. It was helpful to have the feedback from the group....

Let's look a little more closely at this typical response. The first time out, virtually every student experiences what this student experienced: apprehension. But the apprehension seems to be worth it; indeed, during the second reading, this writer says that she felt much less nervous, and two days later, when she wrote this response, her initial apprehension had given way to a feeling of satisfaction. Hearing others in her group read aloud what they had written, this student "realized that everyone or most everyone was in the same boat as I was," a comforting realization and, I think, an important one. Novice writers--all writers--need to know that they are not the only ones in the world who have to struggle to get their thoughts down onto paper. "Oh, I see," the liberating realization seems to go, "we're all having problems with this."

On the other hand, despite the problems, this writer says that "Hearing the other installments read was entertaining and fun." This is another important realization. For many students writing is drudgery and it therefore surprises them to find that other students' writing can be entertaining and fun. With this recognition often comes the resolve to produce writing that gives pleasure back. In short, participation in writing groups seems to push students to produce writing that is not dull: the students are simply unwilling to bore their peers. Furthermore, what they hear others read often inspires them to try new things, to master what someone else has mastered.

The writer uses the word helpful three times. "It was helpful to have the feedback from the group," she concludes. But what form did that help take for this writer? "Some of the things that I thought were not too great got some good responses. Others that I thought were great were confusing to the audience." One of the difficulties of revising, especially for novice writers, is knowing what to keep and what to throw out. This is where feedback comes in handy. It also gives the writer a starting point. There is an additional, almost incidental, benefit that this writer mentions in her quick

response. "Having had to have the installment ready was helpful in that it got me going." Because of the groups, writers in my classes have to do drafts. And because they have to produce drafts, they learn (or relearn) the important lesson that writing is discovery: "As I kept going," my student says, "more ideas came to my head."

What were the problems I encountered when I began to use writing groups in the classroom?

The first problems were logistic ones--problems of space and time. Elbow says that there should be seven to twelve people in a group. But I quickly discovered that in the classroom groups of that size were unwieldly. Groups of from four to seven worked just fine. But to have the smaller groups meant having four to five groups per class. How could so many groups meet in the same classroom? How could the students listen carefully to what was happening in their own group while tuning out what was happening in the other groups? In fact, they couldn't, and I had to find space outside the classroom where some groups could meet, often a very difficult task. Over the years, my students have dragged their chairs down corridors into stairwells or out onto windy lanais--to any place quiet enough for them to listen carefully to their peers read aloud their writing.

One obvious solution to this problem would have been to have students bring copies of their drafts for the members of their group to read silently. I know there are some benefits to be gained from the silent reading of drafts. But I was opposed to such a solution, primarily because, in my own successful group, I had become convinced of the greater benefits to be gained from reading aloud: I was hearing my words in a way that I had never heard them before--hearing the rhythm of my prose, hearing where my writing had voice and where it didn't, becoming aware that the sentences on which I stumbled as I read my draft aloud were <u>always</u> sentences that needed first aid or major surgery. I also knew what students usually did when they got a copy of

another student's writing in their hands: they immediately turned into "English teachers" and began putting in or taking out commas and circling misspellings, began "criticizing" the work of their peers in the ways and the language in which their work had always before been criticized by their teachers.

Another problem that Elbow did not envision when he laid out the groundrules for the teacherless writing class was the presence of a teacher. What role was I to play? My answer to that question has been to become a participant in each group on a rotating basis. I give the same kind of feedback everyone else gives, and so students have a chance to compare the teacher's feedback with their peers' and to learn, when it comes time to revise, that something one of their classmates has said may be more useful than anything their professor has said. Occasionally I read a draft version of something I'm working on (Elbow warns against "having people there who haven't put in a piece of writing themselves"). And when they hear me reading aloud something I'm working on, my students get a glimpse of something they rarely see: a teacher struggling to put ideas into words. In the process they learn that <u>everyone</u>'s rough draft is rough, that <u>all</u> writers struggle.

Writing groups work. My participation in my own is one of the high points of my week. As a result, I am a writing-group enthusiast. I've often talked about writing groups to other teachers. What I counsel is patience: it takes time for students to get used to giving this kind of feedback and to get good at it. The teacher has got to hang in there, in the meantime taking solace in the fact that writing groups get students to produce drafts ahead of time and gives them the chance to read aloud those drafts to a real audience. As the students get better and better at giving movies of their minds, they also begin to formulate clearer ideas about what works and what doesn't—as one student put it, "I began to see the difference between good writing and bad writing." And isn't that what the teaching of writing is all about?